

UNITED STATES
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

Bureau of Biological Survey

*Javelin's
food habits*

DIVISION OF INFORMATION

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How would you like to have a few cactus spines in your salad? If you are like other humans and most animals, your reply would be "No, thank you." But the collared peccary, a pig-like mammal found in Texas, not only eats cactus fruits, but eats the flattened joints, spines and all. This fact was recently observed by food habit experts of the Bureau of Biological Survey, United States Department of the Interior.

A herd of peccaries, or javelinas, as the animals are also called, lives on the Biological Survey's Aransas Migratory Waterfowl Refuge, in Texas. When the animals were observed feeding on prickly pears, refuge personnel watched the "pigs" more closely. They noted that the peccaries ate all parts of the plant, apparently chewing on the thorny material without discomfort.

Recently the food habits experts examined the stomach contents of a peccary that had been found dead. According to the examiner's reports, the stomach was lined with spines. Apparently the thorns did not injure the stomach lining, for the organ was otherwise normal.

So many thorns were in the stomach that the investigator had slivers in his fingers 3 or 4 days after he studied the food contents.

Collared peccaries appear to relish prickly pear fruits and leaves above any other type of vegetation available during summer months, Bureau officials said. The animals have been seen feeding on this cactus for hours at a time.

When feeding on this fruit, the peccaries do not seem to be annoyed by the spines of the pear leaves. They even use their snouts to push the leaves loose from the bases.

After the leaves and apples are knocked off the plants, the peccary rolls and rubs them around on the ground. This is apparently done to break off some of the spines.

Though it is not unusual for some birds and mammals to eat prickly pear fruits, it is uncommon for an animal to eat the leaves of the plants, Biological Survey officials explained. The cuckoo and ani, however, eat spiny caterpillars, and examinations of stomachs of cuckoos show that the stomachs are often lined with spines.

Occasionally range cattle feed on cactus plants, but the cattle confine their feeding to the luscious fruits and attempt to avoid the spines. Other animals observed feeding on various species of cactus include crows, thrushes, cardinals, scaled quails, pocket mice, ground squirrels, kangaroo rats, woodrats, jack rabbits, pocket gophers, and desert bighorns. Many desert-dwelling mammals derive much of their moisture from these plants.

The collared peccary is one of two species of small wild pigs peculiar to North and South America. Not so prolific as its Old World cousins, the peccary has only two young a year. At one time this animal was found as far north as the Red River of Arkansas, but the increasing occupation of the Southwest drove the animal out locally. It is found as far south as Patagonia.

Today there are about 40,000 peccaries in the United States: about 7,200 are in Arizona, 450 in New Mexico, and 32,500 in Texas.

Usually called the peccary, this mammal is also known as javelina or musk-hog. The latter term is applied to the animal because it has a large gland, which emits a strong musky odor.

Collared peccaries usually weigh less than 75 pounds. In northern Mexico and in southwestern United States they are at home in scattered thickets of cactus and other thorny plants on plains and in foothills. Gregarious animals, peccaries live in groups of 4 or 5 to 30 or more individuals. The leader is usually the strongest boar in the herd.

Though known to be an aggressive, sometimes vicious animal, especially dangerous when attacked, the peccary nevertheless is easily domesticated. When taken at an early age, a muskhog often becomes very tame and makes an intelligent and playful pet.

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